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# **Making the Case for an English Academy: Reflections on an Ongoing Endeavor**

*Geoff Bender*

Ever since the publication of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE's) blue ribbon report, *Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers*, teacher education programs have felt a particular kind of pressure to work with school partners in new ways. The first goal of NCATE's Alliance for Clinical Preparation, articulated in the blue ribbon report, to "[f]oster collaborative partnerships among schools, districts, and teacher preparation programs" (NCATE 2010, 25), reverberated throughout teacher education programs nationwide. It's not that teacher education programs hadn't been cooperating in deep and meaningful ways with schools prior to NCATE's enumeration of key principles of clinical practice; they had, of course. It's that this report gave new focus and motivation both to rethink old ties and to forge new ones in order help shape the best new teachers for the profession. Indeed, the goal of stakeholder collaboration has remained so crucial to the reform of teacher education that NCATE's next incarnation, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), took university-school partnerships as the second standard of its accreditation framework (CAEP 2015). From this fresh emphasis on collaboration, an array of Professional Development Schools (PDSs) were either born or newly energized to improve the preparation of preservice teachers through close school-university partnerships.

Fortuitously, the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) issued its policy statement, succinctly titled "9 Essentials," just prior to NCATE's blue ribbon report. The "9 Essentials" provided fledgling and established PDSs with a set of guidelines that these partnership organizations could follow to ensure the integrity of their joint ventures. The guidelines are comprehensive, embracing every aspect of a formal professional development school structure. They include emphasis on a "comprehensive mission," articulating a set of purposes both institutions should share; a ratified memorandum of understanding; a mutually constructed "culture committed to the preparation of future educators"; the establishment of "formal roles across institutional settings" for the implementation and management of PDS initiatives; and a system of "formal rewards and recognition structures" to incentivize PDS members (NAPDS 2008). Quite obviously, such aims require the commitment of significant financial and personal capital from both universities and partner schools as well as a joint leadership structure that allows both institutions equal steering power in a PDS's unfoldment.

At its best, a PDS founded on the "9 Essentials" promises enormous payback for all involved. The benefits Penny B. Howell, Jan Carpenter, and Jeanneine P. Jones describe in their discussion of the relationship between the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and its suburban partner, Concord Middle School, could well summarize the ideal of any such partnership. These include

- extra hands in the classroom, ready access to program faculty, academic courses taught on-site with real-world application just a hallway away, master teachers who become change agents within the building through action research and professional development, extra funding for the school, parent education, university assistance with special projects,

and a positive impact on the achievement of both university teacher candidates and middle grades students. (2013, 43)

Laudable as such outcomes are, not all university-school partnerships result in this kind of ideal exchange. Researchers have documented obstacles to healthy partnerships, including a deep-seated lack of trust between schools and universities that has posed, at times, significant impediments to communication and functioning, even when a PDS has been carefully designed to link institutions via established professional standards (Walkington 2007; Clark et al. 2005; Gore and Gitlin 2004). Trust issues are compounded by factors such as a reluctance of each institution to see legitimate expertise in the other, a skepticism about the viability of the teacher as researcher, and an administration's rejection of shared decision making in favor of principal-driven governance (Feinberg, Dangel, and Bohan 2011).

Given these challenges, some PDSs simply don't launch or come crashing down shortly after takeoff. Such failures, however, should not deter the well-meaning attempts of teacher education programs seeking to establish meaningful links with prospective school partners. What follows is a case in point: the model of a university-school partnership founded less on the comprehensive achievement of NAPDS standards than on the grassroots endeavors of a few individuals committed to improving teacher education, and thus future teachers, in this era of reform.

## **Who We Are**

The founding of the SUNY Cortland English Academy came about, at first, simply because people thought it was a good idea. The Academy's links to accreditation frameworks—specifically, to CAEP Standard 2—did come, but later. Initially, however, the Academy emerged because it had to. High turnover in the English education program replaced an established university-school network with a cadre of fresh faces seeking local connections for professional purposes, but with little sense of how to move forward. The development of an academy as a loose organization of professionals and students across a variety of stakeholder positions thus seemed like a logical first step: a means of creating significant relationships across the divide between schools and academia that could become a forum for substantive conversation while maintaining the spontaneity and personality more characteristic of small, informal groups.

Less rigorously bound than a traditional PDS, the SUNY Cortland English Academy diverges from this and related structures, such as the leadership academy, whose primary purpose is to develop novice administrators in authentic school contexts. Such partnership models are often described as intersection points between theory and practice (Walsh et al. 2000). While our English Academy certainly hopes to synthesize these important dimensions of educational training, our primary function is more practical: to learn from practicing teachers what they think the field needs. As such, our Academy is one part advisory group. But it is also one part mindful social gathering, a means of strengthening the collaborative nature of teacher preparation by giving all stakeholders a chance to share their viewpoints through friendly, informal conversation and, in so doing, educate other stakeholders on what they may not know, differently situated as they are. The Academy is, consequently, committedly egalitarian.

Philosophically, we are galvanized by a constructivism that is intrinsic to our core—by what, in education, might be called a Deweyesque approach to understanding. In particular, we move forward attentive to John Dewey’s notion that “teaching and learning” are best viewed “as a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” ([1938] 1997, 87). In practice, this means close listening by all involved in order to construct accurate, three-dimensional views of key issues in teacher education. Our efforts during meetings yield knowledge made possible only through a mutual sympathy. Active, sympathetic listening, we have found, makes for the best syncretism.

And so, once a semester, undergraduate and graduate students, novice and master teachers, a university supervisor and education faculty converge over cookies and sparkling water to weave together a collective understanding of what it means to bring new teachers into 21st-century classrooms. Academy membership shifts over time, but is approximately ten to twelve at any given time. It is determined partly through professional affiliations—through teacher-to-teacher educator connections forged in other contexts—and partly through a simple and determined reaching out: to practicing teachers who have demonstrated a commitment to our program and to exemplary preservice teachers who have shown dedication to their education and an articulate passion for the teaching profession.

### **Where We Meet**

Our gatherings take place at a number of local schools in and around Cortland County in Upstate New York. Nestled on the northernmost fringe of the Appalachian range, Cortland County, like many upstate counties, shows signs of better days. The seat of a formerly burgeoning agricultural economy—Cortland apples get their name from this once legendary exporter of the fruit—the city of Cortland contains enduringly elegant Victorian brick buildings beside homes and businesses falling into dramatic disrepair. According to the US Census Bureau, the county poverty rate edges over 16%. Its per capita income is \$24,665, and less than a quarter of adult residents have completed a four-year college degree (United States Census Bureau 2016). Feeling the pinch of the rust belt, many families are under considerable financial strain. Over 15% of the county’s children live below the poverty level, while nearly one in three residents is clinically obese (Seven Valleys 2017). In spite of these socioeconomic stresses, more than 90% of surveyed adults find their neighborhoods safe to walk in (Seven Valleys 2017), and the county has the lowest violent crime rate in the six-county Central New York area (Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2016). The challenges and enduring promise of the region push the best of its public educators to make their classroom resources stretch far. Their commitment to children, indeed, provides the gravitational force that keeps our Academy together.

### **A Good First Step**

From our first meeting, the Academy’s commitment to constructivist principles was in ready display. Sitting around several pushed-together tables in a high school library, empty after the last dismissal bell, we generated a list of skills we thought the 21st-century teacher should possess to enter the field well. An hour-and-a-half later, we came away with a very comprehensive list—one that certainly represented the cross-institutional coherence we were aiming for. Here is a sampling:

- More attention to nuanced formalist reading practices
- More attention to syntactic analysis
- A richer array of strategies to overcome reading resistance in recalcitrant students
- A wider array of strategies to assess students formatively
- Better emphasis on sensitizing preservice teachers to different cultural contexts they may encounter in local schools
- Material to help preservice teachers understand how they will be evaluated once employed in tenure-track positions
- Strategies for making the Common Core State Standards springboards for meaningful instruction rather than perfunctory retooling of curriculum
- Stronger attention to methods of backwards planning
- Endowing students with a solid repertoire of strategies for differentiating instruction
- Solid training in “old school” grammar

Teachers, students, and university faculty had much to say, and our list became capacious—too long to tackle in any one or even two methods classes, but generative, nonetheless, serving to focus our teacher education program and future Academy discussions in crucial ways.

For example, the insistent and repeated requests from our school partners for traditional grammar knowledge, the last item on the list above, prodded our education faculty to supplement—but not to compromise—instruction in how to teach grammar in secondary English classrooms. In doing so, English education faculty had to confront a frequent problem in university-school partnerships: the pedagogical gap between what some school districts do and what scholars in the field advocate as best practice. In the case of grammar instruction, many English educators now feel that grammatical concepts are best taught in meaningful linguistic contexts with specific rhetorical aims in mind (Crovitz and Devereux 2017). Some of our school partners, on the other hand, favored teaching grammar in isolation, an approach that has fallen out of favor among scholars. To navigate the impasse, we helped our preservice teachers learn to be bimodal: able to comprehend isolationist approaches *in order to translate them* into context-specific lessons that would help real student writing improve in rhetorical power. Consequently, as our students gain in their ability to shift instructional stances from “old school” to new, they simultaneously increase in the very metalinguistic awareness we emphasize in the development of their—and, ultimately, their students’—grammatical sense.

## A Misstep

Unfortunately, not all our initial endeavors were as rewarding as this first collective imagining of an ideal new teacher’s wide-ranging strengths. Our next step, in an effort to build knowledge of the pressures and demands each stakeholder faces across institutions, was to share artifacts unique to our specific workplaces. One master teacher, for example, volunteered to bring in a sample Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) rating chart, which untenured teachers receive yearly. Another offered to present an array of scaffolding materials made for the teaching of challenging literature. An undergraduate member, then student teaching, elected to showcase her best unit materials. And university faculty members opted to share key parts of a methods textbook and handouts related to the edTPA, the standardized test all student teachers need to pass in New York State in order to obtain certification.

The aim of our artifact share was laudable, as it sought to fill crucial gaps in our collective knowledge, and it did work, to some extent. Veteran teachers in our group were certified before the edTPA became an established requirement and so were unaware of the complex logistics their student teachers needed to navigate to assemble their edTPA portfolios. Student members of the Academy, in turn, were unaware of how untenured teachers were rated by administrators over the course of their pre-tenure years of service and so were both curious and anxious to see what lay ahead. Further, experienced teachers, having received their teaching methods instruction at an earlier time, were not always aware of how the field had progressed since they left academia for the classroom. In short, the promise of mutual enrichment through our artifact exchange was high.

What our exchange lacked—and this was our essential misstep—was a means of logging, uploading, or recording the key features of our respective artifacts for future consideration. Consequently, complex information, introduced through quick presentations, was largely lost. Because we did nothing to extend our experience of these materials and thus deepen our learning, stakeholders by and large left the exchange with nothing more than a glossy understanding of what their Academy partners shared. The experienced teachers among us knew better, but theory and practice, in this instance, diverged. Aiming to be good reflective practitioners, however, we learned from our mistake, as our next step reveals.

### **Next Step: A Co-Constructed Handbook**

The Academy's most recent project is the creation of a handbook that our English education program can distribute to cooperating teachers when they agree to take our students for placements. The purpose of this handbook is to satisfy, succinctly but completely, the question cooperating teachers most often ask us: What are your expectations? In answering this question, we have aimed for an economy of words. Our handbook is designed not be yet one more item in a cooperating teacher's already overstuffed physical or virtual mailbox. Instead, we desire it to be a concise but vital resource that can be kept close at hand and consulted, when needed, for issues both mundane and of consequence. We remain mindful of Alaster Scott Douglas and Viv Ellis's (2011) wise advice about the potential utility of such a document. Handbooks such as ours, they write, are useful to the degree that they can be taken "as living documents of partnership" in teacher education, constantly "evolv[ing]," with an eye always trained "on teacher learning" (Douglas and Ellis 2011, 474). Our handbook, in other words, is made to be flexible enough to transform with the new and pressing needs of student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university personnel. It is created to be dynamic rather than static, comprehensive but not unwieldy in response to the new demands of the field. And as it evolves, as it certainly will, it needs to shed as much as it grows.

To begin construction, the Academy brainstormed the varying needs cooperating teachers typically have as they approach the mentoring of student teachers. We then grouped these needs into logical categories. The result was an intricate map, laid out in blue ink over an expansive white board, that folks outside our circle would not likely have been able to decipher. To us, however, the terrain it marked was clear. It was also co-constructed in the truest sense. Everyone at the table—graduate and undergraduate preservice teachers, novice teachers in their first year

in the field, veteran middle and high school teachers, a long-time program supervisor, and a teacher educator—had a voice in the making of this handbook’s contents.

When drafted, each handbook section formalized a piece of the map. Here is our table of contents:

- Welcome
- Responsibilities
- Suggested Timeline for the Student Teaching Experience
- Expectations for Instructional Units and Lesson Plans
- Evaluation of the Student Teacher
- edTPA
- Professional Development Opportunities/Connections with the School Community
- Preparation for Student Teaching

An appendix concludes this guidebook, providing cooperating teachers with lesson plan template options, SUNY Cortland’s student teacher evaluation rubric, a list of dates by which certain administrative tasks need to be completed, a list of courses student teachers need to have completed before beginning their practicum, and still more information about the edTPA. While substantial, this is hardly an exhaustive list of what could be included. The contents are what are deemed most essential now—a judgment that will, no doubt, evolve over time. Like the Academy itself, this document must stay alive and responsive to stakeholders’ needs.

## **Onward**

So, what’s next on the Academy’s agenda? There are, of course, many possibilities. We could focus on the difficult problem of developing authentic curriculum for both the secondary English classroom and a teacher education program in an era of high-stakes testing that increasingly favors scripted instructional modules. We could focus on the growing demand for school participation in clinical partnerships as teacher education programs face pressure to augment preservice teachers’ observational experiences in the schools. We could focus on bridging the gap between socially-oriented approaches to literary analysis, favored by scholars in literary studies, and formalist analytical approaches to literary study that remain enduringly popular in the secondary classroom. The list goes on. Regardless, I can’t answer that question right now. I haven’t asked my partners yet.

Fundamental to a commitment to our grassroots endeavor is genuine collaboration in the development of a direction that makes sense to all involved. While such a commitment undoubtedly has its disadvantages, including the lack of a mission statement we can turn to in a moment of disorientation, it’s that very lack that, from a different point of view, is likely our greatest strength. The legalistic entailments of a mission statement or group charter do, indeed, bind a group together, but they also, inevitably, restrict a group’s mobility or morph-ability, constraining its capacity to change to meet needs that might depart from the terms a mission statement lays forth. While the English Academy does well at satisfying our institution’s CAEP needs, I would like to think that it will endure even if CAEP decides school-university partnerships are no longer a significant attribute of strong teacher education programs. That is to say, our Academy will endure as long as it nurtures all involved, in tangible and intangible ways,

to keep our professional lives, and the emerging professionalization of our students, thriving well into an unpredictable and rapidly changing tomorrow.

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